FSQS FACTS

MECHANICALLY PROCESSED RED MEAT PRODUCT

Mechanically Processed (Species) Product--MP(S)P--has been permitted as an ingredient in certain processed red meat products since June 1978. Clear and informative labeling is required to alert consumers to its presence.

MP(S)P is produced by breaking up bones from which most of the meat has been removed by traditional hand means, then using high pressure to push the resultant mass against a fine sieve. MP(S)P is composed of the soft tissue and a small amount of fine bone which passes through the sieve. The remaining bone is discarded.

Use of the product and its labeling are regulated by the Food Safety and Quality Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under terms of the Federal Meat Inspection Act, which gives the agency responsibility for determining that meat and meat products are both wholesome and accurately labeled.

The product and the labeling required for its use continue to be controversial. Industry representatives oppose the required labeling, alleging that it is unnecessarily negative and effectively prevents the successful marketing of the product. The public, on the other hand, has opposed the sale of the product and insisted upon strict labeling if it is to be sold.

The regulations on MP(S)P state that it may be used in products such as sausage, frankfurters, and canned spaghetti with meat sauce so long as it makes up no more than 20 percent of the meat portion and so long as it is clearly identified. Labels must carry the phrase,"With Mechanically Processed (Species) Product" in letters at least one-half the size of the product name. And to give notice to consumers who must restrict their intake of foods containing calcium, the presence of powdered bone must also be noted on the front label of the product with the statement, "contains up to ____ percent powdered bone," in letters one-fourth the size of the product name. (The bone is described as powdered bone to indicate clearly the small particle size.)

Thus, frankfurters containing MP(S)P could be labeled "FRANKFURTERS, with mechanically processed beef product. Contains up to .5 percent powdered bone."

Such labeling requirements are not unusual. Labels for many other products are required to carry similar descriptive detail. For example, labels must conspicuously indicate if a product is a "FRANK with byproducts" or a "FRANK, soy flour added." The added ingredient must also be listed in the ingredient statement as is required with MP(S)P.

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The department's regulation of MP(S)P is an effort to make this product available for the market while taking into consideration the instructions of a Federal district court, the recommendations of an expert panel of scientists, and the comments of thousands of citizens concerned about the quality and safety of their food supply.

History

On April 27, 1976, USDA issued a proposal that defined the product obtained by the mechanical separation of meat from bones as "meat." In essence, the definition of meat would have been enlarged to include a mechanically processed product, which could then have been used in finished items, such as lunch meats, with no special labeling requirements. It would simply have been identified as "beef" or "pork."

Prior to making the proposal final, USDA issued an interim regulation that permitted the immediate manufacture of mechanically processed meat on a limited basis.

Both the proposal and interim regulation met with strong opposition from the public. The department received comments objecting to ground bone in processed meats, objecting to the absence of labeling requirements, and questioning whether the product was safe for human consumption. Several consumer groups and the attorney general of Maryland brought suit against the department, charging that there was little information on the health and safety aspects of the product and that the public had not been given the opportunity to comment on its use.

On Sept. 10, 1976, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia enjoined USDA from implementing the interim standards, ruling that until the department had adequately assessed the safety of mechanically processed meat product, the product "must be considered as a substance which may injure health and therefore adulterated and an adulterant."

On the subject of labeling, the court was equally firm. In permitting mechanically processed meat product in a finished product with no special identification, the court said, the regulation would have permitted misbranding of a product labeled, for example, "all beef franks," since the calcium content of such a product would be higher than that of a comparable product without mechanically processed meat product.

The court said,"since the public expects the usual product, it would be misled by the labeling permitted by the regulation. This could prove especially harmful to persons on calcium-restricted diets, who would be misled into thinking that the product contained no more than the usual amount of calcium."

Following the court's ruling, the department conducted an extensive review of the product. An analytical program was initiated to develop data on the amounts of nutrients and substances of concern which might be present in mechanically processed meat product. A broad-based panel of government scientists reviewed the data and compiled a two-volume report on the health and safety aspects of the use of the product.

Revised Proposal

In October 1977, the department proposed a new regulation based on the panel's findings. This proposal called for renaming the product, "Tissue From Ground Bone" and for stringent content and labeling requirements. Public comments were invited and a public hearing was held in Washington, D.C., in February 1978.

Newspapers gave the proposal wide coverage, and some vigorously opposed the idea. One syndicated columnist noted that Secretary Bergland was being asked to make a "tough, Solomon-like decision" on the matter.

More than 4,500 comments were received from consumer and academic groups, industry, farmers, professionals such as doctors and scientists, government agencies, and individual consumers. More than four-fifths of the comments came from consumers who generally argued against allowing the product to be sold under any conditions. They questioned its safety and were concerned that they would not be able to determine easily when mechanically processed meat product was used in a finished product.

Final Action

After careful consideration of all comments, the department on June 10, 1978, published as final the current regulations. These regulations incorporate most of the elements of the proposal which had called for conspicuous and detailed labeling. The name, "Tissue from Ground Bone," however, was changed to "mechanically processed (species) product." The department's position was that the required label would accurately inform the public about the characteristics of mechanically processed meat product, while at the same time allowing the sale of a product that had passed scientific scrutiny as safe for human consumption.

Petition for Change

In April 1979, the Pacific Coast Meat Association petitioned USDA to change the labeling requirements for mechanically processed meat product. The Association alleged that the regulations have stifled the sale of the product and thus have had an inflationary impact on meat prices.

The Association submitted, as justification for its request, an economic study which alleged that mechanical deboning could have added from 640 to 1,240 million pounds of red meat to the total supply in 1978, thus resulting in lower meat prices.

USDA's Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service reviewed the study and found no economic rationale for relabeling the product. ESCS further found that "the paper does not deal with the issue of consumer acceptance nor does it adequately treat the question of appropriate product labeling." Consequently, the petition was denied on May 30, 1979.

In denying the petition, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Carol Tucker Foreman stated that while "we do not want to effectively bar the marketing of any safe product, or to inhibit the use of any process that may reduce industry costs and consumer prices," the agency could find no support for the trade group's claims of severe economic impact caused by the present regulation. Ms. Foreman added, however, that there is always the opportunity for interested persons to seek changes in labels and labeling requirements--and the department will always give full consideration to such requests.

Mechanically Deboned Poultry

Mechanically deboned poultry has been in use for the past 12 years in products such as chicken franks, poultry rolls, and chicken bologna. It was approved for use by the department in 1968, following a study by the National Academy of Sciences, which found it safe for use.

Current regulations under the Poultry Products Inspection Act restrict use of mechanically deboned poultry to a 1-percent limit on bone content, but do not require specific labeling identification.

In June 1979, FSQS published a new study highlighting the latest scientific information on the product and re-evaluating its use. The new report, "Health and Safety Aspects of the Use of Mechanically Deboned Poultry," was reviewed by the same panel of interagency scientists as worked on the mechanically processed meat products report.

The department is encouraging consumers, the industry, the scientific community, and other interested groups to comment on the report and its recommendations. In addition, the department is asking consumers what would constitute appropriate labeling of products composed partially or entirely of mechanically deboned poultry. After all comments are evaluated, consideration will be given to proposing regulations on the use and labeling of mechanically deboned poultry.

This publication supersedes FSQS-21, "Mechanically Processed (Species) Product."